

Reaching Out for Special-Needs Support

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Providing services for students with disabilities can be costly for school districts. Districts are required by law to fund the primary expenses of a special-education program; however, most spend far more than is legally mandatory. This situation puts those districts without sufficient resources to meet their obligations to educate special-needs students in a difficult position.

School districts can overcome some of the challenges of providing special-education services by working with the community in a variety of areas, including providing support for transition services and mental health services, which are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

For example, vocational training can be expanded with job-shadowing and job-training opportunities.

Additionally, local and nearby community hospitals and agencies can provide or supplement mental health and behavioral support services and therapy that students need to succeed in their education program and, subsequently, in the workplace.

Job Shadowing and Training

Transition services, such as vocational training, can help students with disabilities move smoothly from high school to adult living. Local businesses may be willing to help provide these mandated services.

Businesses may benefit from such a partnership in several ways. First, they are helping the district produce better-prepared future employees who have the desired job skills. They may also qualify for tax breaks or government incentives for hiring people with disabilities. In addition, the district can recognize the businesses publicly through newspaper articles and announcements that cite their contributions to the lives of students in the community.

Local workforce centers can help administrators find businesses that are willing to help districts access state and federal funding for job training and employment opportunities for transitioning students. Workforce funding and programs change annually, and building professional relationships in the workforce systems can help schools access funds when they become available.

Services and employment opportunities for students with disabilities vary from state to state. However, most workforce centers offer résumé assistance, job interest assessments, and interview coaching. Other opportunities can include on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and work-experience programs. Some employers offer scholarship incentives or college credit for individuals who complete their program. Others present individuals with a completion certificate that they can show potential employers to validate the skills they gained through program participation.

Colleges and universities often have career placement centers that high school students can access for career assessments, help with writing résumés, and other employment resources. Career center staff may also be willing to visit local schools to address students on how

to dress and communicate during an interview and what employers are looking for in potential employees.

Mental Health and Behavioral Services

Many school districts have trouble finding professionals to serve students with mental health needs and behavior issues. Even if these professionals are available, locating funding for the services can be an overwhelming task. Smaller and more remote districts may have an especially difficult time finding staff with the expertise needed to help students who have these needs.

When looking at services for students with mental health or behavioral needs, school personnel must follow state and federal guidelines to determine what services are legally required. Once the need for service type and time has been determined, the difficulty usually lies in finding the professionals with the qualifications necessary to provide the service and the funding to pay them.

Many districts contract for services with outside organizations, such as universities, private agencies, hospitals, and behavioral health centers. For example, graduate students in a psychology or special-education program may be available to work with special-needs students as part of their practicum or internship. (Be aware that some departments may ask for financial compensation.)

The county health and welfare agency may be available to help coordinate mental health or behavioral health services. The office usually has a referral system for school districts and other agencies to use in cases involving students and families with special needs. If the families or students qualify for assistance, the health and welfare agency may provide funding for the services and the professionals to deliver them. These services can be offered during or after the school day, depending on district policy and the students' individual situations.

Private agencies may also offer mental health and behavioral health services. Positive contacts and productive relationships between school districts and such agencies may positively influence the cost of services and advocacy. The ideal relationship is one in which the district determines the need based on evaluations and information provided by experts in the field and then solicits those services from the agencies.

Be aware, however, that these agencies may advocate for services that may be unnecessary or that may exceed the district's legal obligation. Such cases can be counterproductive to the well-being of the student and district. When referring students to private agencies, it is also important for district personnel to know the qualifications of the individuals working in those agencies.

Local hospitals and behavioral health centers may also be a resource for students with severe emotional or behavioral disabilities. However, in these cases, state health and welfare organizations, not school districts, refer students to these resources.

The school district is financially responsible for the referrals that it makes. Therefore, if made with the support of the state health and welfare department, referrals may be funded through the state for such services and placements instead of through the district's budget. Depending on state guidelines and qualifications, these types of services may be reimbursable through Medicaid.

The district must know the eligibility requirements and must monitor each student's program to ensure that the requirements are being met. But the district must also make all referrals as a team in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Therapy Services

Many students with disabilities require services like speech therapy, physical therapy, or occupational therapy. Districts may employ therapists to meet those needs, but their limited number and the costs involved in employing them often make it difficult for districts to meet the needs of all their students.

Universities, hospitals, and private agencies may have the professionals necessary to provide some or all of the district's related service needs. Although contracting with these agencies may be costly, it allows the district the opportunity to serve all its special-needs students.

Medicaid may be a source of funding for these services. Medicaid funding depends on whether students are eligible and whether the district meets state guidelines for reimbursement. The district must monitor students' individualized education plans for eligibility and services to ensure that it is reimbursed appropriately through Medicaid.

In some low-income districts, close monitoring can result in large reimbursable expenditures. Furthermore, if a student qualifies for Medicaid reimbursement, hospitals and private agencies will often negotiate their costs to be close to or lower than the Medicaid reimbursement rate.

Win-Win

A positive relationship between the school district and the surrounding community is essential to serve special-needs students and send productive citizens into society. Such a partnership can benefit everyone: the district, local businesses, community agencies, community members, and, most importantly, the students. Collaboration, professionalism, and team decisions are critical in this process.

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